ELSEVIER

Evolution and Human Behavior 31 (2010) 334–347

Evolution and Human Behavior

Original Article

Pride, personality, and the evolutionary foundations of human social status

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Initial receipt 29 July 2009; final revision received 21 February 2010

Abstract

Based on evolutionary logic, Henrich and Gil-White [Evolution and Human Behavior, 22(3), 165–196] distinguished between two routes to attaining social status in human societies: *dominance*, based on intimidation, and *prestige*, based on the possession of skills or expertise. Independently, emotion researchers Tracy and Robins [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(3), 506–525] demonstrated two distinct forms of pride: *hubristic* and *authentic*. Bridging these two lines of research, this paper examines whether hubristic and authentic pride, respectively, may be part of the affective-motivational suite of psychological adaptations underpinning the status-obtaining strategies of dominance and prestige. Support for this hypothesis emerged from two studies employing self-reports (Study 1), and self-and peer-reports of group members on collegiate athletic teams (Study 2). Results from both studies showed that hubristic pride is associated with dominance, whereas authentic pride is associated with prestige. Moreover, the two facets of pride are part of a larger suite of distinctive psychological traits uniquely associated with dominance or prestige. Specifically, dominance is positively associated with traits such as narcissism, aggression, and disagreeableness, whereas prestige is positively associated with traits such as genuine self-esteem, agreeableness, conscientiousness, achievement, advice-giving, and prosociality. Discussion focuses on the implications of these findings for our understanding of the evolutionary origins of pride and social status, and the interrelations among emotion, personality, and status attainment.

Keywords: Social status; Hubristic pride; Authentic pride; Dominance; Prestige

1. Pride and the evolution of social status

All human societies reveal status differences among individuals that influence patterns of conflict, resource allocation, and mating (Fried, 1967), and often facilitate coordination on group tasks (Bales, 1950; Berger, Rosenholtz & Zelditch, 1980; Ellis, 1995). Even the most egalitarian of human foragers reveal such status differences, despite the frequent presence of social norms that partially suppress them (Boehm, 1993; Lee, 1979; see discussion in Henrich and Gil-White 2001). High-status individuals tend to have disproportionate influence, such that social status can be defined as the degree of influence one possesses over resource allocations, conflicts, and group decisions (Berger et al., 1980). In contrast, low-status individuals often passively give up these benefits, deferring to higher status group members. As a result, high status tends to promote higher fitness than low status, and a large body of evidence attests to a strong relation between social rank and fitness or well-being (e.g., Barkow, 1975; Cowlishaw & Dunbar, 1991; Hill, 1984).

In evolutionary accounts, emotions are fitness-maximizing affective mechanisms that coordinate a suite of cognitive, motivational, physiological, behavioral, and subjective feeling responses to recurrent environmental events of evolutionary significance (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000; Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009). Given that status competition has, in all likelihood, long been a fitness-relevant feature of human social life, humans may have evolved a motivational, affective, and ethological suite of psychological adaptations geared toward competing with other group members for social status, and signaling (self-perceived) relative status. The emotion of *pride* may be a major part of the affective suite of mechanisms that (a) motivates status-seeking efforts, (b) supplies psychological rewards and recalibrates psychological systems to sustain attained status, and (c) provides the affective substrate for signaling (via pride displays) status

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1090-5138/$ – see front matter © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
doi:10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2010.02.004

achievements or self-perceived status (Tracy, Shariff, & Cheng, in press). Thus, pride may represent a psychological adaptation that guides the selection of strategies (including cognitions, subjective feelings, and behaviors) from an organism's repertoire, and thereby facilitates the acquiring, sustaining, and signaling of social status (Tracy, Shariff, and Cheng, in press).

Several lines of psychological research are consistent with this perspective. First, a number of studies have demonstrated conceptual and experiential links between pride and status: (a) individuals intuitively associate pride with high status (Tiedens, Ellsworth, & Moskowitz, 2000), (b) dispositionally agentic individuals (i.e., those who typically seek and possess power and control) tend to feel greater pride than those low in agency (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002), and (c) individuals induced to feel pride tend to display high-status behaviors and are perceived by others as influential (Williams & DeSteno, 2009). Second, pride experiences have been found to motivate achievement and perseverance at difficult or tedious tasks, at least among American subjects (Verbeke, Belschak, & Bagozzi, 2004; Williams & DeSteno, 2008); consequent achievements are, in turn, rewarded with social approval, acceptance, and high status. Third, nonverbal displays of pride, which are universally recognized and shown in response to success (Tracy & Matsumoto, 2008; Tracy & Robins, 2008), send a rapidly and automatically perceived message of high status to other group members (Shariff & Tracy, 2009). This automatic association between the pride nonverbal expression and high status generalizes even to small-scale societies on Fiji's outer islands (Tracy, Shariff, Zhao, and Henrich, in prep). Among educated Western samples, pride has been shown to signal high status more strongly than any other emotion expression examined, and the high-status message sent by the pride expression is powerful enough to override contradicting contextual information in predicting implicit judgments of status (Shariff, Markusoff, & Tracy, in press; Shariff & Tracy, 2009). Thus, the accumulated evidence is consistent with the view that pride evolved as a mechanism for motivating behaviors oriented toward increasing social status and informing other group members of self-perceived status shifts.

One question that arises from this account, however, is why there exist two distinct facets of pride, only one of which is associated with socially valued achievements (e.g., Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989; Tracy & Robins, 2004; 2007a). Studies have shown that pride is best characterized as consisting of a *hubristic* facet, marked by arrogance and conceit, and an *authentic* facet, fueled by feelings of accomplishment, confidence, and success. These two facets are conceptualized and experienced as distinct and independent, and are associated with highly divergent personality profiles (Tracy & Robins, 2007a). Hubristic pride is the more anti-social facet, associated with disagreeableness, neuroticism, and a lack of conscientiousness, as well as narcissism, problematic relationships, and poor mental health outcomes (Tracy, Cheng, Robins, & Trzesniewski, 2009). In contrast, authentic pride is the more prosocial, achievement-oriented facet, associated with the socially desirable Big Five personality traits of extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, high implicit and explicit self-esteem, satisfying interpersonal relationships, and positive mental health.

Given the notably negative personality correlates of hubristic pride, it is not immediately evident why this facet would have evolved. One possibility, though, is that both pride facets emerged to promote social status, but along different avenues.

2. Two evolved status strategies: prestige and dominance

Henrich and Gil-White (2001) proposed an evolutionary model articulating two distinct paths to attaining status in human societies: *dominance* and *prestige*. *Dominance* refers to the use of intimidation and coercion to attain a social status based largely on the effective induction of fear. In the dominance hierarchies that characterize many nonhuman species, social rank is determined on the basis of agonistic encounters (Trivers, 1985). In humans, dominance is not limited to physical conflict, but can be wielded by controlling costs and benefits in many domains, and is typically seen in individuals who control access to resources, mates, and well-being. Dominant individuals create fear in subordinates by taking or threatening to withhold resources. In turn, subordinates submit by complying with demands or providing material or social resources to safeguard other more valuable resources, such as their physical welfare, children, or livelihoods. Prestige, in contrast, refers to status granted to individuals who are recognized and respected for their skills, success or knowledge. According to Henrich and Gil-White (2001), prestige arose in evolutionary history when humans acquired the ability to acquire cultural information from other group members, because natural selection favored selectively attending to and learning from the most knowledgeable or skilled others. As a result, subordinate group members would be motivated to provide deference (e.g., mates, food, coalitional support) to prestigious individuals, who in turn permit followers access to copying their skills, strategies, and know-how.

Distinctions parallel to dominance and prestige have been made in anthropology (e.g., Krackle, 1978; Barkow, 1975; Chance & Jolly, 1970), psychology (e.g., Gilbert, Price, & Allan, 1995), and sociology (e.g., Kemper, 1990), but the framework adopted here has several advantages over these earlier models: (a) it explains why humans seem to demonstrate two notably different ethological patterns in subordinates (e.g., copying and deferring to leaders, or avoiding and fearing them), only one of which is paralleled in non-human primates, (b) it explains why certain socially attractive qualities (e.g., expertise and success) promote high status, (c) it can account for cultural differences in the traits and abilities that lead to high status (e.g., why athletic